CANADIAN INDIAN RELIGION

by

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At a time like the present, when what we have hitherto regarded as the very foundations of civilized society are being questioned in so many parts of the world, when the Christian religion, as we have interpreted it for centuries, is being openly attacked and in some countries rejected, when men's bodies, and not only their bodies but their thoughts, are being regimented and directed towards increasing the majesty and power of a new, a strange and to some of us a monstrous divinity, the state, it is appropriate that we should consider for a few minutes what were the thoughts of a certain non-Christian people, our Indians, on the subject of what is really man's place and purpose in the universe of which he seems a part. For religion, whatever its ultimate origin, has been one of the most potent forces in human history, capable of overriding all barriers of environment, custom, speech, and, if we may use the term, race; and nowhere was this more apparent than in Canada, a half-continent inhabited, before European settlement, by at least fifty Indian tribes that differed widely in speech, in customs, and in the outward forms of religious observances, but that were nevertheless remarkably uniform in the inner beliefs on which those observances were founded.

The basic doctrine throughout the country was the kinship of man with nature. Europeans tend to set man apart from the outside world: they consider him a special creation of the Deity, endowed with a soul and aspirations that mark him off from everything else. Moreover, they sharply contrast animate with inanimate nature, things that live and move from those that appear to have no life. The Canadian Indian recognized no such distinctions. To him all nature was one in kind; the rocks on the hillside, the trees of the forests, the animals on land, in the sea and in the sky, even the stars in the distant heavens, all were endowed with different outward forms, but all alike possessed personalities similar in kind to those of the Indians themselves. Their outward forms were transitory and impermanent, since even the hard rock must finally crumble into dust; sometimes, indeed, as with the shape of running water, they were as transitory as the clothes to which the Indians often likened them; but their personalities, their souls, remained as constant and unchanged

as human souls. Thus the little universes of the Indians, the tiny sections of earth and sky that represented the bounds of their sight and knowledge, became filled with spiritual entities all of which claimed the Indians as their kin.

Just as human beings, however, are not all gifted alike, but some excel in one thing, some in another, so likewise was there variation in the external world. Not only have birds the gift of flight which is denied to human beings, but the eagle soars higher than other birds and surpasses them in strength. So, too, in the animal world, the buffalo and the moose excel in strength, the fox, the wolf, and the wolverine in cunning, the deer in fleetness, while the squirrel is equally at home on the ground and in the trees. A blow that would crush a man makes no impression on hard granite. In the eyes of the Indian these 'qualities' inherent in external things were the outward manifestations of spiritual forces. Consequently everything in his cosmos glowed in greater or less degree with some spiritual force that might be either friendly or hostile.

Observation revealed no definite grading in this cosmos, no orderly subjection of certain powers to others. Yet clearly some were far mightier, more free and more far-reaching in their influence. Who, for example, could check the forces inherent in the winds, the thunder, mother earth, and the light - and life-giving sun? These awed the Indians with a sense of mystery; and throughout the whole of Canada man held them in special veneration.

A few tribes in the north of Canada lingered at this stage of thought. Their universe was a playground for spiritual forces that differed in might from one another, but one and all acted independently. It was like an army of soldiers with no officers in command, and no common foe to inspire concerted action.

Such a conception of the universe could not satisfy the majority of the Indians. Just as they demanded order and discipline in their societies, so they found the universe unintelligible unless it was organized on a similar pattern. For every species of plant and animal, therefore, they postulated a ruler or chief with magnified powers, and these in turn they subordinated to still higher powers. The latter were generally vague and nameless, but in some regions the Indians defined them more clearly and gave them such names as the "Rulers of the Four Quarters of the Sky." Above these again, in

the belief of many, ruled the sun deity, associated with, but ranking higher than the moon; and the sun himself was but the visible manifestation, the first deputy, of a still mightier power, the true ruler of the cosmos, known variously as the Great Spirit, the Master of Life, the Lord of the Shining Heavens, and He-Who-Dwells-Above.

In this way the Indians arrived at the conception of a Supreme Being. Manifestly, their conception of him hardly coincided with the Christian conception. He was not the Great Creator who fashioned the world and directs its course for some divine destiny beyond the intelligence of mortal minds. Neither was He that Supreme Intelligence or Guiding Spirit pervading all matter and all space that the Roman poet Vergil contemplated when he wrote

Spiritus intus alit et magno se corpore miscet.

Rather he was the ultimate source of all the power or force in the universe, power that was single and yet divisible, like the radiation of the sun; power that actually was divided, not only among lesser deities, but among all the objects of nature, including man himself.

Christianity, which makes God the fount of all power, makes him also the fount of all goodness. Some of its adherents hold the problem of evil insoluble. Others dispose of it in one of two ways: either they deny its real existence, asserting that what appears evil to human eyes is simply God's way of working and inevitably results in good; or, if they cannot convince themselves that evil is unreal, they postulate a duality in the universe, a God of Light and Goodness perpetually struggling against a God of Darkness and Evil. A few tribes in eastern Canada that pondered over the same problem arrived at the second solution, that the world was governed by two Great Spirits, one good and one evil; but they too failed to resolve the contradiction this doctrine entails.

The majority of the Canadian Indians ignored the problem altogether. Possessing neither the desire nor the talent for metaphysical speculations on the origin and purpose of the universe, or the nature of good and evil, they accepted without question the existence of evil, and concerned themselves not with its explanation, but its avoidance. Most of them thought that even the Great Spirit was too remote to trouble himself greatly about human affairs; and while they rendered him lip service, and occasionally approached him in prayer, they directed most of their thoughts to those lesser powers -- the spirits

of birds and animals, and of the sun, the winds and the thunder, that seemed to exert a more immediate influence on their daily lives.

These powers, as we have seen, might be either friendly or hostile. Whether they were friendly or merely neutral, the Indian might unwittingly arouse their hostility through his own actions. To avoid this calamity, every tribe evolved in the course of centuries innumerable regulations and taboos that were handed down from one generation to another. In the far north no Eskimo woman would make new caribou-skin clothing during the winter months when the sun was absent, lest the spirits that controlled the weather should release the storm-winds from their prison in the sky; and, in the south of British Columbia, no parents of twins might bathe in the sea or in the rivers until their children were able to walk, lest the salmon refuse to migrate at the proper seasons.

It was natural that the most important regulations and taboos should relate to the food supply, since the hunter who offended the spirits of the game animals could hardly hope for success in the chase. Thus in British Columbia every Carrier Indian who killed a bear chanted a prayer over its dying body to please its departing spirit; and for the same reason, the Eskimo of the Arctic threw away a portion of every caribou's liver. In the woodlands of eastern Canada the traveller may still come upon a tall pole strung with animal skulls, deliberately suspended there by the Indians lest their defilement by dogs should offend the animal's spirits and bring the hunters ill-luck.

Any violation of these regulations and taboos was sin, and sin inevitably brought punishment on the wrong-doer and his kin unless the unseen powers turned a merciful ear to their prayers and entreaties. Certain tribes in eastern and northern Canada believed that public confession would absolve them from all supernatural penalties. The tribes in southern Ontario, on the other hand, found the road of escape through a scape-goat; they ceremoniously cast their sins on a pure white dog, which they then strangled and burnt as a sacrifice.

Sacrifices were common from the Atlantic to the Pacific, but only rarely did they involve the killing of animals or of human beings. Before attempting to run a dangerous rapid, or to cross a perilous defile in the mountains, the Indians would throw a little tobacco into the water, or add a stick to a pile already raised by previous travellers, in the hope that the supernatural

power dwelling in the neighbourhood (fairy, if you wish to give it that name) would grant them safe passage. Many, when in trouble or danger, lifted up their hands in prayer to the Great Spirit or the Sun-god, and threw a little fat, tobacco, or sweetgrass into a fire. Before eating, again, some Indians habitually threw away a few crumbs of food as an offering to any spirits or shades of the dead that might be lurking in the vicinity.

Sacrifice, however, was never more than an adjunct to prayer, in which the Indians found the true key, as they believed, that would unlock the gate to the supernatural world. As he crossed the threshold of the house to begin his hunting, a Vancouver Indian would pray:

"O Thou who Dwellest Above, Holy One, Thou hast made the trees and the animals. Thou seest that I am poor. Thou knowest that I have obeyed the rules Thou didst ordain for my ancestors and for those who should come after them. Grant me now the power to kill a deer; help me to obtain food for my family."

Even to this day, when the warm air of summer entices the prairie Indians to desert their frame houses and erect their old-time tipis, one may occasionally see an old man climb a neighbouring hill at sunrise, and from its summit pray the sun-father to bless his people in the tents below. Regulations and taboos, the Indians thought, might ward off the hostility of the supernatural world, but prayer alone could elicit its active help.

There is a world-wide tendency for prayer to become stereotyped, to degenerate into incantations of meaningless or half-meaningless phrases. This rarely happened in Canada, and then mainly in those districts where certain religious rites became the function of a regular priesthood. The daily prayers of the Indian issued from him spontaneously. The supernatural world seemed too real and omnipresent for him to place any trust in unintelligible formulae: he felt constrained to address it from his heart.

He did, however, believe that prayer could be powerfully reinforced by fasting (itself a major sacrifice), especially at the age of adolescence, when the physical and psychological changes in human beings brought them into closer relationship with the unseen forces all around. Throughout most of Canada, boys (and sometimes girls) of tender years fasted and prayed in solitude in the hope of a visitation from the supernatural

world. Each tribe had its own notion of the form the visitation would take. A voice might address the suppliant from the sky, a bear might seem to lie down at his side, or his soul might wander away to a mysterious mountain cave resonant with singing and drumming. Whatever the form the vision assumed, the suppliant was firmly convinced that he had acquired a supernatural guardian whom he could summon to his aid in any dire emergency; and ever afterwards, in compliance with his dream, he carried on his person a dried animal skin, a feather, or perhaps merely a wisp of hair, as an ever-present assurance of his "blessing."

In this way the Indian, inheriting the doctrine of his spiritual kinship with nature, sought to enlist its forces for his own protection and welfare. By his prayers and fasting he forged a mystic link between himself and the supernatural - or, as he himself regarded it, - the natural world, a link so mystic and holy that he rarely dared to reveal the vision that created it, through fear that the link would be broken. Nor did he strain the link needlessly by invoking his guardian spirit on every occasion of distress or difficulty. Too frequent a summons would "wear out the blessing," and the link might be snapped when perhaps it was most needed. Hence he called on his guardian spirit only in the greatest crises, frequently only once or twice in a lifetime. Nevertheless, it was a never-failing source of strength and confidence. The Indian who faithfully cherished his vision, and obeyed whatever instructions his guardian spirit had then imparted to him, felt, as it were, protecting wings around him that would shelter him in any dire emergency.

Not all the amulets that the Indian wore on his clothing or around his neck symbolized his guardian spirit. Some had a purely magical intention. Just as Europeans have been known to conceal "lucky" coins in their pockets, so certain Indians carried curiously-shaped stones (some of them fossils) to bring them good-fortune in their hunting. Amulets of this kind contained their own magical powers, and could be bought and sold without losing their supposed efficacy. The amulet symbolizing the guardian spirit, on the other hand, possessed no more intrinsic value than the crucifix worn by a Christian priest. It was a token of its owner's relationship with the spiritual world, a relationship established by his vision; and it could possess no meaning or value to another Indian whose vision was certainly different. Hence the warrior who

stripped a fallen enemy of his amulets regarded them simply as trophies, since their real significance had perished with their owner.

Many Indians, however, found it difficult to dissociate all virtue from the guardian-spirit amulet, especially when its owner was unusually successful in life. Those who lived on the plains finally adopted the fiction that the "blessing" could be transferred with the symbol provided the new owner acquired also a knowledge of the vision and of the songs that went along with it. In that area the buying and selling of visions became an established ritual, and a few amulets were enlarged into complex "bundles" associated with important tribal activities. Their owners in consequence enjoyed great prestige and ranked among the leading men in their communities.

Dreams of every kind possessed deep significance to the Indians because they seemed to free the soul from its bodily shackles and to permit its association with other spiritual forces. Often a man would abandon an important enterprise merely because a dream had seemed to presage ill-luck. Just what distinguished the vision from an ordinary dream is not quite clear, unless, perhaps, its vividness and intensity. Certain Indians were more prone to visions than others; in the eyes of their countrymen they were especially favored by the supernatural powers, which might appear to them unsolicited even in broad daylight and bestow on them faculties not granted to ordinary individuals. These persons then became medicine-men in their communities, credited with power to divine the future and to cause and cure diseases. The majority of the medicine-men, however, were normal individuals who developed a professional technique by training under other medicine-men, and deliberately induced their visions by long-continued prayer and fasting. They were not quacks (with rare exceptions), for they genuinely believed in their mission and their ability to commune with the unseen world. Some of them, indeed, underwent fearful privations in childhood to equip themselves for their profession, privations similar to those endured by adolescents seeking their guardian spirits, but far more intense.

The experience of an old medicine-man who died near Vancouver just a few years ago vividly illumines this point:

"When I was only three years old my mother, who was herself a medicine-woman, made me bathe in the river and scrub my limbs with spruce boughs before breakfast, even though there was ice on the water; and one morning after I had scrubbed myself -- I was still only three -- she clothed me with her blessing or power, what we call in our language swi-em. Every living creature, you know, possesses its special strength or power, something invisible to normal eyes that dwells inside it, and yet can issue from it, giving it power to do the things it wishes to do. Well, that morning she clothed me with her power; she passed her hands over my body, from head to feet, draping her strength over me to shield and fortify me for the trials that she projected for me later. Thereafter she would never allow me to creep into her bed on cold dark mornings, or to receive food from any one who might be ceremonially unclean. Every night I slept alone in my own little bed, and every morning I bathed and scrubbed myself with spruce boughs that I might be pure and without taint in both mind and body. By day I played with the other children, and I helped my kinsmen at home and in our hunting camps. My uncles (for my father was dead) taught me to handle a fish-net, to trap small animals, and sometimes to fire off their guns; yet always I felt that I was different from other children, though in what way I could not understand.

"Thus I grew to the age of about eight. Then at intervals throughout one winter my mother called in three of her oldest and best informed relatives to teach me the ancient history of our people and the commandments which He-Who-Dwells-Above had imposed upon us when he established us upon this earth. I still bathed night and morning, winter and summer; but so also did other boys of my own age, and many of the men.

"Two more years passed uneventfully by, and I reached the age of ten. Then one morning my mother roused me from my bed and said:

"Pierre, it is time now that you trained to become a medicine-man. Go back into the woods, but be careful that no one sees you. Whenever you come to a pool bathe and rub yourself with spruce boughs, then walk on again. Stay out as long as you can. Remember that He-Who-Dwells-Above has given you power. Pray to Him as you walk along; ask His help; plead with Him to strengthen you for the trials you must now undergo.

Don't be afraid, or imagine that you will die. Be of strong mind."

"I dressed and stole away into the woods. No one except my mother knew where I had gone, or that I was training to be a medicine-man. I was hungry and cold, for there was snow on the ground and she had sent me away without breakfast; but I remembered what she had told me, and I prayed to Him-Who-Dwells-Above for strength. Twice when I came to pools of water I bathed, rubbed my shivering limbs with spruce boughs and hurried on again. But by noon I could bear the cold and the solitude no longer. My mind became weak, my feet turned uncontrollably homeward, and I ran as fast as I could to the house.

"It was afternoon when I entered, but my mother paid no attention to me; neither then nor at supper-time did she offer me any food. I crept into my bed, worn out with fatigue and hunger, and fell sound asleep.

"At daybreak she woke me again and said:

"Pierre, you must go back to the woods. Go farther than you went yesterday, and don't come back so early. You are hungry; drink all the water you wish, but don't nibble anything, not even a blade of grass. And remember to keep praying to Him-Who-Dwells-Above."

"I cried bitterly and thought that she was terribly cruel to me, but it was no use; I had to go. I don't remember how far I walked that day, or how many times I bathed; but it was late in the afternoon when I reached home. Although I was famishing, my mother gave me very little to eat and immediately sent me to lie down. Then at dawn she drove me back into the woods, without breakfast, and with orders to stay away longer even than the day before.

"That third day it was almost dark when I returned. I thought that now she would surely give me a full supper; but she sent me to bed fasting, and drove me, still fasting, into the woods again the next morning. This time I did not return until it was really dark. Then she gave me a scanty supper; but half an hour after I had eaten she handed me a feather, saying:

"Go and bathe in the river; and, after you have bathed, tickle your throat with this feather so that you

give the water what you have eaten. For the river is holy; it journeys day and night, coming no one knows whence, and travelling no one knows whither. Pray to it. Tell it that you are striving to become a medicine-man, that for a long time yet you are going to fast; and ask it to help you. Then come back into the house."

"I obeyed her instructions and went back into the house. She led me to one side so that no one might overhear us and said:

"Tomorrow morning you must go back into the woods and stay away as many days as you can. Be sure not to nibble at any of the shrubs or trees, but bathe often and rub yourself with the boughs of evergreens. Drink copiously from the pools in which you swim, then give back the water by tickling your throat with fine twigs of the vine maple. Remember that when you are pure in mind and body, and lie down to sleep, you will hear voices singing. Pay no attention to them; they are the voices of the evil medicine-men who live around us, medicine-men who bewitch their fellow-men and cause sickness and death. Do not listen to them; put their songs out of your mind because, if you think of them, they will stay with you for ever and you will become an evil medicine-man such as they are. Think always of Him-Who-Dwells-Above and pray continually 'I would help the people when they are ill; I would gain power to heal sickness.' Now lie down and sleep."

"In the morning she examined me to see that I was warmly clad, gave me some matches but no blankets, and sent me out to continue my fast. I do not remember how many days and nights I stayed away on that occasion, only that before darkness descended I would kindle a fire and gather branches for a bed; but when I did return home, weak and exhausted, my mother fed me very sparingly and sent me out again as soon as I seemed able to endure another trial. So I continued all through the winter. Each time I went out my sufferings seemed a little less, until after the first hour of walking I felt light and vigorous, and was conscious of neither hunger nor thirst.

"Spring came, and my mother said to me:

"Stop fasting now, Pierre. The sweet briers are budding, and the berries will soon be ripening. They would tempt you to eat, and you could not resist the temptation. Bathe in the woods as often as you wish

and scrub yourself with fir boughs, but do not try to fast."

So from spring to autumn I fished and hunted and played with the other boys of the village. But when winter came again I resumed my fasting; I roamed the woods, bathed in its icy pools, rubbed myself with the boughs of the evergreen trees, ate nothing, but drank water copiously and gave it up again. After each bath I prayed to Him-Who-Dwells-Above, and I danced until I fell to the ground exhausted; then at night I slept on beds of branches or in the hollow of some tree. Gradually my skin became hard like the bark of the trees with which I scrubbed it. No cold could penetrate it; the rain and the snow that fell on me seemed warm.

"I remember well how I returned to my home one morning, exhausted by many days of fasting, and stretched myself out on my bed; and how an old priest, one of my early teachers, came up to me thinking that I had lain there all night, and said in a voice of scorn:

"My boy, you will become a wonderful medicine-man, lying there with your head covered by your blankets, pampering your miserable flesh. If you cannot endure fasting in the woods take some meat and tea with you; and if you can't bear to scrub your body with branches and stones rub it with soft flour."

"So he taunted me until I rose from my bed and said bitterly:

"You wish me to die. Well, I will die. I will go farther into the woods than I have ever gone before. I will stay away longer than ever."

"Then I walked out of the door and stayed in the woods for three weeks.

"Four winters I endured this penance. Then at last my mind and body became really clean. My eyes were opened, and I beheld the whole universe.

"I had been dancing, and had fallen to the ground exhausted. As I lay there, sleeping, I heard a medicine-man singing far far away, and my mind travelled toward the voice. Evil medicine-men seemed to swarm around me, but always there was some one behind me who whispered, "Pay no attention to them, for they are evil."

And I prayed constantly to Him-Who-Dwells-Above, asking for power to heal the sick, not to cause sickness as did these evil ones.

"I reached the place where the medicine-man was singing, a house unlike any that I had ever seen before. He who was behind me whispered:

"Go inside. This is he for whom you are seeking, the true medicine-man for whom you have undergone penance all these years."

"I entered. The medicine-man was kneeling on the floor, and beside him was his water, in some mystic vessel that was neither a dish nor a basket. He turned and looked at me.

"Poor boy," he said. "So you have come at last. Kneel down beside me."

"I knelt beside him. In front of us appeared every sickness that afflicts mankind, concentrated in a single human being.

"Wash your hands and wrists in this water."

"I washed them. He grasped them in his own and massaged them, giving them power.

"Now lay your hands on that sickness and remove it."

"I laid my hands to the patient and cupped his sickness out with them. He rose to his feet, cured.

"That is how you shall remove every sickness. You shall chant the song you have heard me sing and cup out the sickness with your hands. Now go."

"My mind returned to my body and I awoke; but now in my hands and wrists I felt power. I rose up and danced until I fell exhausted again and my mind left me once more. Now I travelled to a huge tree -- the father of all trees, invisible to mortal eyes; and always behind me moved the same person as before, though I could not see him. As I stood before the mighty trunk he said:

"Listen. The tree will speak to you."

"For a long time I stood there, waiting. Finally the tree spoke:

"O, poor boy. No living soul has ever seen me before. Here I stand, watching all the trees and all the people throughout this world, and no one knows me. One power, and one only, shall I grant you. When you are treating the sick you shall see over the whole world; when the soul of your patient is lost you shall see and recapture it. Remain here for a while till some one comes with a noise like the rushing of a great wind -- some one who always rests on top of this tree. Do not look until I bid you."

"I waited. There came a sound as of a great wind at the top of the tree.

"Now look," said the tree.

"I looked. On its summit stood a great white horse. Its hoofs were red, and two persons sat on its back.

"That horse flies all over the world," said the tree. "I shall not give you its power, for you would not live long."

"My mind returned to my body; I awoke and bathed again in the pool at my side. After my bath I drank copiously of its water, and tickled my throat with a twig of maple. Then I prayed to Him-Who-Dwells-Above; and I danced till I fell to the ground and lost consciousness. My mind travelled forth again over a beautiful prairie until something tripped me, something hard like stone, and a voice said to me:

"Poor soul, go no farther. This is the leader of all things that are upon this earth. You are the first who has come here."

"The being who had tripped me stood up and chanted a song.

"Take this stone that I used for a pillow," he said. "Hold it in your two hands and kneel down. For a long time I have been watching you, watching your struggles."

"As I knelt down, holding the rock in my hands -- it was different from all other rocks -- the being mounted on the back of my head and rubbed my jaw.

"You shall heal the sick. Place your lips to that rock and suck it. Suck it once only, but suck it hard."

"I laid my lips to it and sucked. It became soft like flesh, and something -- it was blood -- issued from it and entered my mouth.

"Don't eject it on to the ground, but swallow some of it and rub the rest on your hands."

"He came down from the back of my head and took the rock from me.

"That is how you shall heal the sick. That is how you shall suck away their illnesses. Now go."

"I awoke, and found myself lying on the ground. Now I had power, power in my hands and wrists to draw out sickness, power in my mouth to swallow it, and power to see all over the world and to recover souls that had strayed from their bodily homes. I was a medicine-man; I could heal the sick, I could banish their diseases, even as my mother had foretold me. But not always. Whenever He-Who-Dwells-Above should decide to take away some one's soul I could do nothing. This also my mother had told me.

"I rose from the ground and returned home. My years of fasting were ended. I think my mother knew what had happened, for she asked no questions, nor did she urge me to stay in the woods again. So I remained at home, and as soon as I recovered my strength joined my uncles in the fishing and hunting."

There were regional variations in the training that medicine-men underwent and in the methods that they employed, but nearly everywhere they pursued their profession in complete independence of one another. Only in Ontario, and in parts of British Columbia, were some of them organized into societies, and even in those places they could not usurp the religious leadership or modify to any appreciable extent the prevailing beliefs and practices. In British Columbia they had to subordinate themselves to a clan organization based on a

system of castes, while the Ontario tribes were too democratic even to submit unquestioningly to their elected political officers, much less to tolerate a domination of the religious field by any special group. So although medicine-men often attained considerable influence, especially in the more primitive tribes, nowhere did the Indians evolve a powerful priesthood to direct their religious life, as have other nations both of the Old World and the New. In many of their religious festivals, indeed, the presiding officers were not medicine-men at all, but laymen, either leaders in civil life or officials directly appointed by the people.

The absence of organized priesthoods, and the fluidity of Indian religion, exercised a profound influence on the mythology. Within certain limits, each native had to make his own adjustments to his spiritual world, and thereby develop his own individual tenets and practices. No tribe, therefore, formulated for itself a coherent body of myths or legends that it handed down generation after generation. It is true that there were coherent bodies of myths on the Pacific coast, but these were the property, not of a tribe, but of individual families, by the same rights of tenure as the houses and the totem-poles; and they were of little concern to other families that cherished their own special myths. Likewise, on the plains, certain myths were individual possessions because they were associated with 'medicine' objects, and could not be related except on special occasions, and then only by the owners of those objects. Elsewhere myths were the common property of entire tribes; but because there was no authority to standardize or teach them, the repertory of the average Indian was small and his versions seldom agreed with those of his fellow-tribesmen.

Characteristic of Canadian Indian mythology is the lack of any clear distinction between myths properly so called, quasi-historical traditions, and common folk-tales. This again was a direct outcome of the religion, or rather of that spiritual interpretation of nature on which the religion rested. The Indian believed that the powers of the supernatural world interfered in human affairs just as actively in his own day as in the days of his remote ancestors, and he attributed to their agency any and every event that he was unable to explain on purely physical grounds. His historical traditions, therefore, often blended fact and fancy inextricably, even when they related to events within his own lifetime; and the world of the supernatural ran like a warp

through many everyday folk-tales.

He did, however, make one distinction, one that stands out fairly sharply in the tales of nearly all tribes. It is a distinction between events he attributed to a heroic age before the world assumed its present form, and events he assigned to the world as he knew it in his daily life. In the heroic age, he believed, man could freely communicate with animals and birds, many of which, indeed, were human beings at that time, or else commonly appeared in human garb and were swayed by human thoughts and emotions. The many nature tales, similar to those we find in other lands, hark back to this earlier period. So also does another group of tales more distinctive of the Canadian Indians and of the Indians to the southward, tales of a mighty Trickster and a mighty Transformer, who are sometimes combined into a single character. In these stories the Trickster travels over the world playing pranks on men and birds and animals, but often catching himself in his own toils; while the Transformer, like another St. Andrew, destroys or transforms the monsters that ravage mankind, creates new animals for man's benefit, and gives to the land and the waters their present forms.

It is rather surprising, therefore, to find in Canada none of those creation myths that are so common in other parts of the world, myths that ascribe to the will of one great power the genesis of light and darkness, earth and sky. There are myths that purport to explain the origin of the moon and Milky Way, of certain lakes and rivers, of the caribou and the salmon, and of man himself; but the notion of a First Cause for everything, of a Great Spirit that created ex nihilo, as it were, everything that lives or moves or has its being, seems never to have entered the Indian's mind, even in those regions where he acknowledged the existence of a Supreme Being. He premised, perhaps unconsciously, that nature's greatest phenomena had always coexisted with the Great Spirit, and that to both alike there was neither beginning nor end.

None of his myths, again, are frankly didactic, deliberately designed to inculcate the prevailing morality. It is true that they actually served that purpose in certain regions, and that the moral of a tale was reinforced at times by an explicit epilogue. Yet this seems to have been a mere after-thought, for the whole character of Indian mythology belies its ethical

intention. There is no effort, for example, to elevate right above wrong, to encourage the strong to protect the weak, or to represent that the evil-doer will meet with his just reward, either in this life or in the life hereafter.

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In the character of the Canadian Indian realism and mysticism blended strangely. Beneath the semblances of external things he pictured beings animated with thoughts and emotions similar to his own, beings that struggled as he did to maintain their places in the arena of life. He did not hesitate to destroy their outward forms, to shoot down the buffalo with his arrow, or to tear up the plant from its native soil; but he extended to all things a certain measure of reverence, as befitted one who himself played a rôle in the same amphitheatre. The why and the wherefore of the struggle he did not ask, nor did he concern himself greatly with its ultimate outcome. It sufficed for him that he too had been stationed in the arena, and all that he demanded from his religion was assistance to play his part successfully until old age or other forces beyond his control put an end to the struggle. Whether he prayed to the spirit world around him, or turned his eyes upward to the sky god above, he asked for earthly blessings only, health and long life, a loving wife and children, and prosperity for himself and his kin. Not for one moment did he believe that death put an end to all existence; but so dense a fog obscured the after-life, so conflicting were the opinions about it, that he planned his course for an earthly existence only and blindly resigned himself to whatever fate awaited him hereafter.

National Museum of Canada,
Ottawa.