

Our Indian Department.

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IS THERE HOPE FOR THE INDIAN?

MS a missionary amongst the Indians, when pleading for them, I have often been asked, "Do you think you can convert an Indian?" My reply has always been, "I am certain God can. I am equally certain that He does convert many." I do not now intend to enter into the question of God's saving power, able to "save to the uttermost," able to reach any soul into which God has breathed the breath of life. I for one cannot understand how it could be otherwise. Nor can I understand how any one, claiming the name of Christian, can deny that the God who endowed every Indian with life, can both quicken his soul into newness of life, and enable him by his daily life to witness that his faith is a living reality.

My desire in this article is to show that the native faith of the pagan Indian, so far from being an insurmountable obstacle to the reception of the true faith, contains much to give us hope. Hidden away amidst much that to us seems senseless and childish are certain truths which underlie our own grand Gospel.

First, There is a belief in a Deity. I cannot pretend to define all that they mean by this. The attributes of this "Great Mysterious," as the Dakotas name Him, are but dimly defined in the Indian's creed. His mind seems to have shrunk from the task which so many in other lands have so lightly undertaken—the attempt to define in any poor weak human speech all that God is and all that He is not.

They do, however, say this much, that He is

the Supreme Ruler of the spirit world, and the Creator of the earth and man.

Secondly, Indians believe in a vicarious sacrifice, the suffering of one for the sake of many. It is true history, so far as I can find, says nothing about human sacrifices amongst the Northern tribes. But along and south of our southern boundary they were not unknown. There is the well known story of the tribes formerly living along the Niagara River, whose custom it was at certain times to send a beautiful maiden over the falls, as an offering to the Great Spirit on behalf of the whole tribe. The Aztecs, of Mexico, as is well known, believed that the sacrifice of human lives and the shedding of human blood, was absolutely necessary for the safety and welfare of the nation.

The tribes now in Canada, while not going as far as this, have however, certain rites founded on the great idea underlying the vicarious sacrifice—that of substitution. The Blackfoot gives his little finger to save his tribe from threatened calamity, or to win for it a special blessing. Amongst other tribes the mourner sheds his own blood and offers portions of his own flesh, to win for his dead and peaceful journey through the vale of death, to the land of eternal rest and plenty. The white dog is slain not only as a thank-offering but, as I believe, as the sin-bearer of the people.

The report of the American Association for the Advancement of Science for this year (1889) will contain a very interesting paper on this subject of the White Dog Feast, by Dr. Beauchamp.

The practices of past and present races above cited are, I think, sufficient to prove conclusively that the ideas of an atonement or of a vicarious sacrifice are by no means foreign to the Indian mind.

Thirdly, Indians believe in a revelation by the supernatural to the human. The idea of communication between the Great Mysterious, or other spirits and certain men is very common. Sometimes they believe direction and counsel are given in "visions of the night," sometimes only after long fasting and watching and perhaps self-mutilation can the desired inspiration be obtained.

Fourthly, They believe in a future state. Naturally their ideas on this subject are very dim and tinged with their own earthly notions. We ourselves are, I suspect, at an immeasurable distance from the full realization of all that is involved in this great truth. But this much the Indian does grasp—that life is not all here—that on the other side of that dread event which we call death, there is life, and the possibility of happiness and rest. More than that he believes that virtue according to his standard, will there be rewarded—that the opposite qualities—vices and weaknesses will there be punished.

Granted then that the Indian has, though dimly, grasped these essential truths—that he has a belief in a Supreme Being, a vicarious sacrifice, a revelation from the unseen world and invisible