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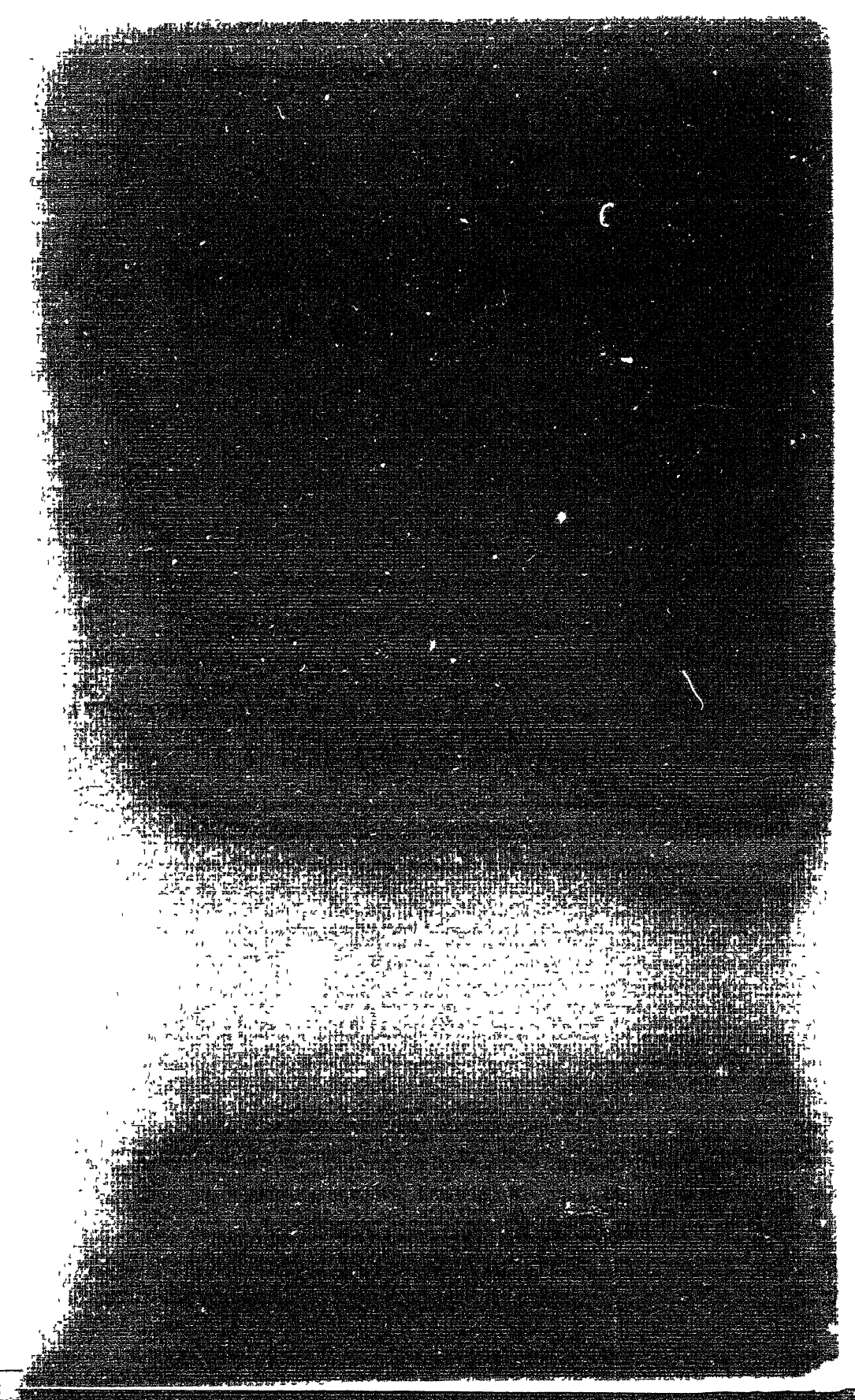
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ON THE PAGANISM OF THE CIVILISED IROQUOIS OF ONTARIO

By DAVID BOYLE, Curator of the Archæological Museum of Ontario

It has often been a subject for doubt whether this or that primitive people, if left to itself, would have emerged into civilisation—in other words, it has proved a matter of uncertainty whether the people concerned possessed the potency of progress. In some cases Dame Nature has relentlessly cut off the supply of raw material before the experiment was well begun, and in others but a short time afterwards, showing us, at any rate, that the elements of success were nullified, and worse than nullified, by contact with superior peoples.

Respecting no division of the human race has there been more diversity of opinion as to innate possibilities of improvement than with regard to our American Indians, or, as a sister society has lately decided to call them, *Amerinds*. But the terms just mentioned are of very wide application—much too wide to make it possible for any one to arrive at a conclusion, for what is true of one stock, or of one group in a stock, may be wholly, or largely, inapplicable to any other division or subdivision.

The Huron Iroquois believe that they themselves originated from a hole under a hill on the north shore of the St. Lawrence river. Their traditions further declare that on account of a great dissension which took place, those who are latterly known more specifically as Hurons, and have been regarded by Brinton and Hale on philological grounds as the senior branch, found their way by circuitous routes to the country which lies north of Toronto, on the south shore of the Georgian Bay, while the portion we call Iroquois took a southerly course and occupied the northern and central part of what is now the state of New York.

Other two not inconsiderable bodies found excellent hunting grounds still farther west, on the northern and southern shores of Lake Erie, the former being known to us as the Attiwandarons, or Neutrals, and the latter as the Eries, or Cats. Other divisions lying south of the main body were the Tuscaroras and Andastes. It is wholly with those who made their home in New York and ultimately in Ontario, that we are now concerned.

It is unnecessary for present purposes to follow the history of these people from the date of their first contact with the French. Let it suffice to say that early in the seventeenth century they became the undying enemies of France, on account of an attack that was made on them by Champlain, who allied himself with the Hurons of Ontario, and thus initiated a series of wars that continued

until the French were compelled to retire from the continent. This almost chronic state of hostilities, however, did not prevent French missionaries from devoting themselves to the conversion of these most untamable of savages, a small portion of whom became Roman Catholics, and have left descendants living now at St Regis and Caughnawaga on the St Lawrence. Protestant missionaries also, both Dutch and English, met with some success, but still a very large minority remained true to paganism, so that of those who, on account of their loyalty to us, left the newly formed United States to take up their abode in Canada, nearly one-fourth clung to the belief of their forefathers. To-day the proportion of avowed pagans to professing Christians is about the same, and we have therefore, on the Grand River Reserve in Ontario, a pagan population of fully one thousand persons. There is another settlement on the Bay of Quinte at Deseronto, all the members of which are Mohawks, and profess Christianity.

It will be seen very readily that a condition of society in which paganism openly professed and practised has existed side by side with Christianity for nearly three hundred years cannot fail to possess many features of peculiar interest to the ethnological student, and to afford much material for profound study.

One of the first things that obtrudes itself on the attention of a visitor, even during a brief stay among the Iroquois, is the utter indifference of Christian or of pagan to the religious convictions of each other. In their Council or governing body of fifty-two members both beliefs are represented, yet no recriminations or causes of difference occur on this account. Many of the so-called Christians are influenced largely by old-time predilections, and either attend no place of worship at all or would just as soon put in an appearance at a pagan festival in the long-house. Still it must be acknowledged that there are whole families on the Reserve which are as truly Christian as birth bringing-up, and Indian nature render possible, but one's opinion of the possibilities need not be unreasonably high.

The pagan does not regard himself, nor is he regarded by others, as being in any degree, or in any sense, inferior. He is not ostentatiously a pagan otherwise than in connection with the regulation feasts, such as those of the New Year (when the white dog is burned), the strawberry-dance, the corn-dance, and many others. Indeed, it is not characteristic of the Indian to be ostentatious in any capacity, except that of a brave, and, for the Iroquois, the days of bravery in his sense have long since departed. In his religious or ceremonial dances he may deck himself gorgeously with bead-work, cheap jewellery, feathers, and highly coloured garments, but there is an evident lack of individuality about him notwithstanding. He seems to regard himself merely as an anybody, as a quite indifferent unit of his clan, as one who happens to have the necessary toggery for such a display, and whose impersonal or clan duty it is to appear in any sort of grotesque costume he pleases. Other men please themselves also by attending

the most solemn feasts in everyday clothing. Most of the younger fellows appear in fashionable tailor-made garb, with linen collars and bright silk neckties. The women dress, as a rule, more carefully and conservatively than the men, their chief article of apparel besides their gowns or dresses being a brightly coloured shawl, either of some strong uniform colour or of a large tartan pattern.

Now as to the worship itself. Originally it was, as a matter of course, purely of a natural kind, that is to say, it was founded wholly on the experience of the race respecting everyday phenomena, the occurrence of which was accounted for by explanatory tales based on anthropomorphic and zoomorphic grounds. Thus the sun would appear to have been regarded as an animate being with whom, in time became associated the Great White Wolf, if, indeed, it was not itself this very animal. Whiteness, it may be observed, was always associated in the Indian mind with the East, and, in time, with goodness, success, and health. The other cardinal points were also connected with their respective colours. In some mythologies the deer became the mediator of the sun, and in others the turtle. Among nearly all American peoples the rattlesnake was of supreme importance, yet we do not find this creature represented among the totems of the Iroquois. Animism, or spiritism, pervaded every nook and cranny of Indian belief. Not only could the lower animals converse with one another, and arrange plans to benefit their human friends or plots for the discomfiture of their enemies, but the hills, the rocks, the streams, the trees, and every object in nature, as well as those produced by art, possessed a spirit. As a result of this conviction, the Indian was, and is, an ardent coward in the dark.

They also had their equivalent of the "fairies" of the Old World—little people who held the power to assist men, or to play them infinite mischief.

Certain places were, to use a Scottish phrase, "no canny." Among the Iroquois such places were mostly near rapids or *were* the rapids, but sometimes they were in the form of caverns, or of beetling cliffs, on the shores of rock-bound lakes. On approaching or in passing such spots placatory offerings of tobacco were made, and sometimes objects of considerable value were dropped into the water.

To dreams, our Iroquois, with all his congeners, was an abject slave, for he regarded them as the experiences of the first of his three souls, the second being the one which always remained with his body, and the third that which became visible as his shadow.

Roughly, this was the mental attitude of the Iroquois to nature and natural phenomena until the appearance of Ayontwatha, the "Hiawatha" of Longfellow, who, however, makes an ethnological muddle by assigning an Iroquois culture-hero to Algonkin legend. Ayontwatha was, first of all, a political reformer, if we may so dignify one who lived in such a crude condition of society, but his success in bringing about a confederation of the Caniengas, Senecas, Cayugas, Onondagas, and Oneidas must have exercised a very powerful influence in modifying some beliefs and intensifying others among all these "nations" or tribes.

We know not when he lived, despite attempts that have been made both by Indians and by whites to determine his date, indeed, we are uncertain whether there ever was such a person. But, in any event, there came a time when the spirit of change entered the minds of the Iroquois, and henceforth they became more adaptive and more modifiable than their surrounding Algonkin neighbours. Thus it was, in large measure, that they proved themselves such unconquerable and resourceful opponents of European, and especially of French, aggression.

After falling under purely British influence the number of professing Christians rapidly increased, but, as has already been pointed out, fully 25 per cent have remained steadfastly pagan.

It is from this point that our study of Iroquois paganism becomes interesting, because it was impossible that Christian and pagan doctrines and practices could long exist in proximity without some modifying influences extending from the stronger to the weaker side. Long before this time, however, the Iroquois in common with many other native races, had, perhaps unconsciously, adopted the idea of a Great Spirit from the missionaries, for in the aboriginal pantheon no *one* being of this kind exercised supreme power or even seemed to take any interest in the work of the other spirits: an idea based no doubt on the customs of the Indians themselves, over whom no one man exercised absolute sway.

Having adopted the idea of a Great Spirit, the admission of some other beliefs became easier, not because they had any logical connection at all, for logic is quite foreign to the Indian mind, but because, perhaps of the familiarity consequent on intercourse with Christians, both white and of their own kind.

It was probably on account of knowledge arrived at in some such way that an Onondaga, by name Ska-ne-o-dy-o, who lived at the end of the eighteenth century (in 1790 according to some), declared himself a prophet and claimed to have had intercourse with divine beings. His congeners, by this time knew enough about Christianity to be in some measure prepared for a message from the Great Spirit, and their peculiar notions concerning soul-experiences fitted in with the announcement of Ska-ne-o-dy-o that he had been favoured with an interview with four beings in heaven. Undoubtedly the Indians had heard of the Trinity, but as three is an unsatisfactory number to the Indian mind, we here have a reference to four persons, or the Four Angels, for although Ska-ne-o-dy-o *saw* only three, the fourth one was always present.

It is somewhat remarkable that although this revelation is of such a comparatively recent date, there is a good deal of confusion respecting what is known of the circumstances by the friends and relations of the prophet, but this only goes to show us how extremely difficult it is to get at the truth in such matters, and how little confidence we may place in tradition, if we demand exactitude.

All the stories, however, agree in the statement that Ska-ne-o-dy-o's revelation came to him while he was in a trance, so that we need not care whether this condition lasted for only a few hours or until he came to himself.

on the fourth day. He did not profess that he had seen the Great Spirit, but only the four beings who were commissioned by the Great Spirit to deliver His message. These were young men, dressed in the height of Indian fashion, and carrying bows and arrows. Here we have a compromise and a correspondence, the former as to the number, and the latter as to the office, for Christian teaching always introduces a medium of communication between the Creator and His people. As a matter of course, the four persons were Indians, and behaved in Indian manner, for otherwise the appeal to Indian minds would have lost much of its effect. Still Ska-ne-o-dy-o perceived clearly enough that his people required a new gospel—one that would correspond in a measure to the altered circumstances in which they found themselves, and that would, to some extent, place them on a level with white men. Himself, no doubt, unaware that a belief in the Great Spirit was one of comparatively recent acquirement, he urged the people to offer prayers to Niyoh, the Creator, but he adds a touch of Indian anthropomorphism when he teaches that all such addresses must be made before noon, on the ground that as the Great Spirit goes to sleep in the afternoon, he cannot then hear anything said to Him. These prayers were nearly an adjunct to the old-time dances, which were to be maintained, for the angels said to Ska-ne-o-dy-o, "You must worship Niyoh, the Great Spirit, by dancing the turtle-dance at the new moon when the strawberry ripens. At the new moon of the green corn you shall give a thanksgiving-dance. In the midwinter at the new moon you shall give another thanksgiving-dance. You shall have a thanksgiving-dance at the new moon at the time of making sugar. You shall dance at the new moon of planting-time, and pray for a good harvest. You shall dance at the new moon of the harvest-time, and give thanks for what the Great Spirit has given you." Among primitive peoples dancing is itself, as a distinguished writer has said, "praying with the feet." Oral prayer was therefore, largely, the result of European influence, something with which the Indian had become to some extent acquainted, and something that was of comparatively easy assimilation.

Even the matter of the prayers, however, is in the nature of a compromise for the addresses to the Great Spirit are rather in the form of requests that He will command other entities to do their duty, the performance of which, but for His orders, might be done either reluctantly or not at all. Take, for example, bearing in mind, meanwhile, the animism which pervades the Indian mind, the following petitions in the prayer which is used at the Burning of the White Dog in connection with the New Year festival—

"We ask that the sun will continue to shine on us and make all things grow

"We ask that the moon may always give us light by night

"We ask that the clouds may never cease to give us rain and snow

"We ask that the winds may always blow

"We ask that the trees and plants may always grow.

"We ask that Thou wouldst send all sorts of animals for food and clothing, and make the birds increase in number"

In this modern form of prayer it will be observed that Rawen Niyoh, the Great Spirit, is addressed as controller and director, in older (but not the oldest) forms of address, which certainly are not prayers, the animistic and individually independent idea comes out strongly, as when, for example, at the green-corn-dance the head man, or speaker, says, "We thank the earth for all the things that grow for food," and at a Cayuga sun-dance, at which I was present, the old chief opened the ceremonies by thanking the earth for having yielded grass, trees, tobacco, and medicine, the sun for giving light and heat, the moon for making dew, and the thunder for supplying rain and for preventing serpents from coming up through the ground and destroying the people. And then comes this "We thank the Four Angels for protecting us from sickness, disease, and accident, and the Great Spirit for providing everything and governing all things, although we cannot see Him and never will see Him unless we are good." Here the stock and the gratts are quite distinguishable—the ancient phrases remain much as we may suppose them to have been for centuries, while Rawen Niyoh and the Four Angels are a plain addition without the remotest attempt to modify the old or assimilate the new.

The animistic and the anthropomorphic assert their sway once more when we are gravely informed that Rawen Niyoh also thought it would be a good plan to have some Thunderers, to whom he gave power to take charge of the whole world, telling them to use plenty of cold water in their work, as long as the world and the people should last. "He said to the Thunderers, 'You may go among the people just whenever you like and give them all the water they need', and we know that all the plants and trees are pleased when the cold water comes to the earth. They are glad the Thunderers have not forgotten them. Niyoh also told the Thunderers to kill anything that might be unlucky to the people."

The Indian Angels vouchsafed to Ska-ne-o-dy-o other information, some of which had reference to what we may suppose the best of his people had always believed, but some of it undoubtedly inspired by Christian influence. Thus they told him that Niyoh intended men and women to marry and have families, that the children were to be treated kindly, not to be provoked in any way, not to be despised for ugliness or awkwardness, never to be whipped, that homeless children should be adopted by married persons without families, and that no person in want should be turned away hungry from one's door. In all this, as well as in what appertains to the holding of dances, or festivals, we have what is native, or nearly so, but when Ska-ne-o-dy-o declares that the four persons said, "Your people must not play cards," and "Niyoh says it is wicked to play a fiddle, and wrong to drink rum," he is profiting by his contact with white people. The reasons adduced for the last-named inhibition are truly Indian. "If," said the prophet, "you are drunk when you go hunting, the animals will smell you a long way off and keep out of your way, if you go a-fishing the fish will hide, if you are driving a horse the smell of the rum will make him run away, your dog will

not like you, your corn and pumpkins and tobacco will not grow, if you try to dance or to run, or to sit still, you will have no sense, everything will go wrong”

It might be difficult to find a better illustration of purely aboriginal and illogical reasoning than this is. Incapacity to hunt, fish, manage a dog or a horse, or to cultivate plants is attributed to the intelligence of these things—they *know* that the man has been drinking too much, and for this reason fear him, or despise him—and it is only when the man tries to sit still, or to run, or to dance when drunk, that he himself will discover his lack of sense.

The inhibitions respecting cards and the use of the riddle were no doubt intended by the “four persons”—i. e., by Ska-ne-o-dy-o—to prevent too much social intercourse with white people, the former on account of the Indians’ well-known gambling propensities, and the latter owing to their equally notorious desire for the strong drinks which usually accompanied such festivities a century ago. It was no doubt also intended to prevent any assimilation of the native feasts or dances with the white peoples’ social gatherings—perhaps indeed this was the main consideration.

Gambling in general, however, was not forbidden, only gambling with cards. The Indian prophet was too well aware how utterly impossible it would be, even were he wishful, to abolish this practice among his people. Twice a year at the great public feasts it was allowable to play for stakes—and at home or elsewhere, they could always do as they pleased in this respect.

The feasts or dances so often referred to were, and are, a stern necessity. Without these, life to the pagan Indian would not be worth living, and one of them is held on every possible occasion in addition to the regular, seasonable, ceremonial affairs to which reference has already been made. But in accordance with present custom some of the latter are set apart for thanksgiving. Now the giving of thanks (in our sense) for anything is wholly foreign to Indian nature, as indeed it is perhaps to aboriginal nature everywhere. It is an acquired method of expression, and whether the *sentiment* of gratitude has yet been acquired is another question.

Agreeably to the totemic idea thankfulness is out of place, or rather has no existence in any of life’s conditions. For primitive man in his tribal relations, individualism has but a hazy meaning, if any at all. He gives as freely as he takes, neither expecting nor giving thanks, but his associations with us have taught him to comply with form at least, and thus in some measure to remove from himself the reproach of the white man respecting Indian “ingratitude.” We find, therefore, that Ska-ne-o-dy-o has introduced expressions of thankfulness in connection with some of the ceremonial feasts, but it is also observable in the older and slightly adulterated dance-speeches that not a word of this kind occurs. Take, for example, the address of the head man at the Burning of the White Dog, notwithstanding its ostensible appeal to Niyoh. Following what may be called the invocation, he asks that the sun, moon, clouds, and winds may continue to perform their duties—that the warriors, young men, and women

may be preserved in health and strength, that medicine-plants and fruit trees may continue to grow, that game may be abundant for food and clothing, and he concludes with the self-righteous and unconsciously humorous wish, 'May the scent of the tobacco I have thrown on the fire reach Thee to let Thee know we are still good, and that Thou mayest give us all that we have asked'

With the introduction or adoption of the belief in a Great Spirit—"One, you know, that bosses all the other spirits, and the little peoples, and Ta-ion-ya-wá-gon, and Ongwehógon, you know," as a Seneca once explained to me—it became necessary to provide some means of communication between heaven and earth in addition to prayer and thanksgiving, which, alone, are somewhat too intangible for this purpose. The Burning of the White Dog was therefore seized as a fitting occasion for the sending of messages heavenwards. But this long antedates the appearance of Ska-ne-o-dy-o, who actually forbade the ceremony, probably because it was a subject of ridicule among white people. Notwithstanding both circumstances, our Canadian Iroquois pagans maintain the custom in connection with their annual New Year's dance at the time of the February new moon, when near the close of a ten days' celebration the master of ceremonies reverently says—

"Great Master, behold here all of our people who hold the old faith, and who intend to abide by it

"By means of this dog being burned we hope to please Thee, and that just as we have decked it with ribbons and beads, Thou wilt grant favours to us, Thy own people

"I now place the dog on the fire that its spirit may find its way to Thee who made it, and made everything, and by this means we hope to get all we want from Thee in return"

In full accordance with Indian belief, the spirit of the dog, on reaching Niyoh, will apprise him of the state of affairs on the earth, a belief that not only proves a want of faith in the adequacy of prayer alone, but which could not have had any reason for its existence before Rawen Niyoh himself was introduced to "boss all the other spirits". But the killing, burning, or sacrifice of a white dog has always, and everywhere over the northern part of our continent, possessed some mysterious influence. In my archaeological report for 1898 I have taken some pains to summarise our knowledge of this custom, whereby it appears that not only with the Iroquois, but among the Algonkian, Athabaskan, and Siouan peoples, as well as among the more highly cultured Aztecs, the custom of using such an animal in one or other of these ways was very generally observed.

It may suffice in this connection to state that in the opinion of General Clark, of Auburn, New York, who has made a special study of Iroquoian mythology, the white dog is now employed as a substitute for the white wolf, which formerly represented the sun, and Dr Brinton, quoting Von Tschudi, approves the statement of the latter that "white dogs were closely related with cosmogonical and culture myths" in many native religions.

However this may be, the point to be observed here is that our present-day pagan Iroquois, having long since forgotten the original significance of the rite, now attribute mediatorial or intercessory powers to the white dog, the spirit of one of which they despatch annually to carry a message to Niyoh, or Rawen Niyoh, the Creator. Nothing can be more certain than this, that when there was no Great Spirit there was no need for the services of a messenger.

But notwithstanding the evident influences which led to this new idea respecting the office of the white dog's annual visit, implying as it does a heaven, as distinguished from a mere "happy hunting-ground," it is worthy of notice that our Indian friends did not take kindly to the idea of a hell, which they have left in the undisturbed possession of the white man. Punishment in any case was objectionable to the Indian. It may be difficult to reconcile this statement with our knowledge of the cruelties he inflicted on his enemies, whether white or of his own blood; but his purpose on such occasions was rather to maintain the honour of his totem, or of his tribe, by rendering or providing an equivalent for the sufferings of his own people when they were in the enemies' hands, as well as with a view to test the power of his captives' endurance, hoping, if possible, to make them evince signs of pain, and thus prove themselves to be only women. Our pagan Iroquois, then, has no hell, but his leniency in this respect is more than counterbalanced by his exclusiveness respecting heaven, where he admits no white man. On the New York Reserve it is asserted that George Washington, on account of his goodness to the Indians, has been permitted to go half-way, where he remains speechless, and accompanied by his dog; but on the Grand River Reserve in Ontario, I have never heard but one Indian refer to this exception, and it is not improbable that in time it will be wholly forgotten among Canadian pagans.

The remark has often been made that certain groups of people in various parts of the world have failed to keep pace with neighbouring groups through sheer inability to advance beyond a given line. Among ourselves civilisation is a comparatively slow process, and with some of us it is of much slower development than it is with the mass. American Indians are not a progressive people. They assimilate European notions very slowly, and, at best, somewhat imperfectly. Tradition and usage are more powerful than appeals to action along new lines, even when the advantages of the latter course are made plain. It is only when tradition has been deprived of its power by the segregation of individuals from national or tribal associations that tradition itself ceases to govern.

If we judge the pagan Iroquois thus, we shall wonder that they have been in any way modified by European contact so far as their religion is concerned, for they are thoroughly separated from their Christian fellows in all that concerns their myths and superstitions. It is not with them, as it is with us, a matter of disputation concerning what constitutes the true religion, for according to their philosophy it is not necessary that all should be of one faith. The white man's God need not be—indeed, is not likely to be—the same being as the Indian's

God, and here we see how very superficially after all the idea of a Great Spirit affects the aboriginal mind. It has never been made to fit exactly into the Indian pantheon, which recognises no paramount being, but leaves the thousand-and-one phenomena to the good or bad offices of a thousand-and-one independent spirits, or, perhaps it would be more correct to say, to spirits each of whom is independent in his own sphere, for it is within the power of any one of these beings to create so much trouble on his own account as to compel one or more of the others to "come to time" in any matter of dispute.

The wonder then, is, not that Iroquois paganism has been to some extent modified by Christian influences, but that it has been modified so little. One must mingle with these people in their homes, in the fields, at their games, and in their long-houses in connection with their feasts or dances, to appreciate fully their mental attitude in this respect. They are utterly unconscious of any similarity between their own and the white man's religion. They believe that Niyoh, the Great Spirit, has always formed a part of Indian belief, and consequently have no difficulty in accepting the story respecting the four persons or angels he commissioned to communicate with Ska-ne-o-dy-o. Similarly they have no hesitation in the offering of specific thanks to Rawen Niyoh, and have perfect faith in the intermediary services of the white dog. If we added to these a few suggestions respecting conduct, based on the Christian code of morals, we have about all for which Iroquois paganism is indebted to European culture after a period of more or less direct contact lasting for three hundred and fifty years. It is questionable whether many other forms of paganism have remained so unchanged for the same length of time, and in anything approaching similar circumstances. It is, indeed, a matter of doubt whether several forms of Christianity and Mohammedanism have not suffered or benefited to a greater extent, even during the space of the present century.

Here we have in almost their pristine simplicity and crudity the music, the songs, the dances, the speeches, and the ceremonies of old, but the origin and meaning have long since been forgotten. Their maintenance is purely conservative. Even the significance of the words of the song is lost, and in many of the ceremonial rote-speeches in connection with the feasts, words and phrases are employed respecting which even the oldest medicine man has no knowledge. In this, however, they are only a few degrees worse than ourselves. The same is true with regard to such customs as the "scattering of ashes," the spraying of heads with sweetened water, the anointing of heads with sunflower oil, and several other rites.

It is interesting, also, to note that all these are indulged in by the half-breeds, and by some who are more than half white, seemingly with quite as much zest as by those of purer or wholly pure Indian blood. It seems somewhat anomalous, at first sight, to observe, engaged in a dance or a dream interpretation, persons of all shades of colour, from the darkest (which is darker

than mulatto) to a tint that conveys only the slightest suspicion of Indian blood

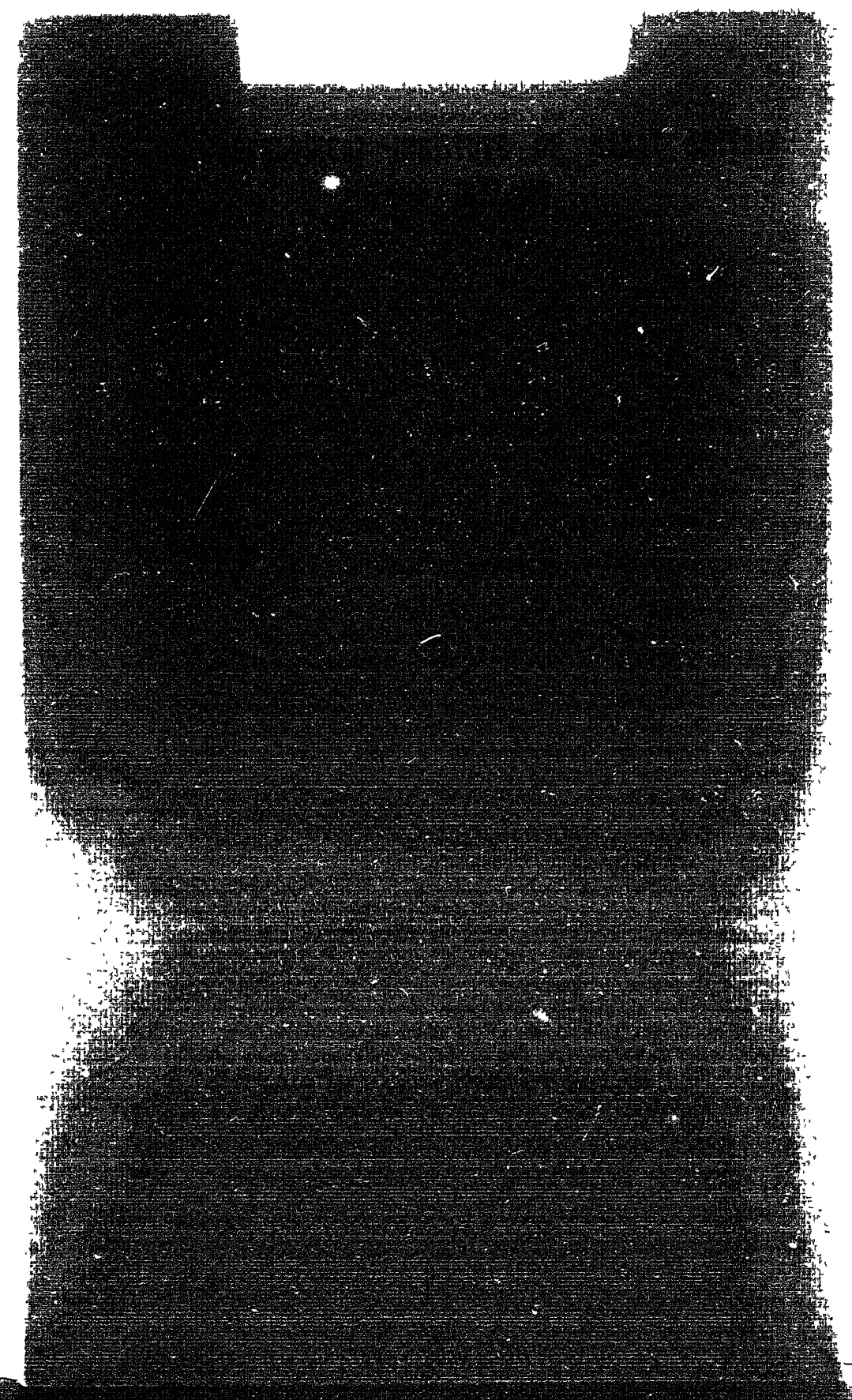
But the old-time ways are doomed, and will probably disappear as a system long before the people die out, for the young men mingle more and more with their white neighbours, the young women frequently find employment as domestics in "white houses," and parents are gradually losing their grip of the ancient forms, although they cling tenaciously to the superstitions these typify

Meanwhile the condition is an extremely interesting and instructive one to the anthropologist, one which in many respects is unique in the history of the world

I have frequently regretted that when the British Association met in Toronto a few years ago, no arrangements were made for a visit of the Anthropological Section to the Six Nations' Reserve, only some sixty miles distant, when it would have been a matter of but little difficulty to arrange for a special pagan feast, and where the members might have been able to realise, to some extent, much that has been either only slightly adverted to or imperfectly explained in the present paper, respecting the pagan rites and ceremonies of the Iroquois—or, as one has called them, the "Romans of America"

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