

Christ and the Chiefs: The Indians' Messiah

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For many years we have regarded the Indian's belief in a Supreme Being as very vague and undefined. He has, however, appeared to recognize a "Great Spirit" and a "happy hunting-ground," the home of the departed braves -- a country where beautiful prairies and forests are abounding in game, watered by cool streams, forming an ideal Indian heaven. This belief seems a part of his nature, just as his love for his free and savage life, which the advance of civilization is forcing him to renounce. The buffalo is a thing of the past, and even the elk, the antelope, and the deer have nearly disappeared, and he finds he must live on the bounty of the white man or starve. For years he has been confined to military reservations, and has chafed under the restraint thus put upon him. Little wonder he looks for a change, and longs for his once free life, and gladly grasps the new belief in the red Saviour, which is rapidly spreading to every Western tribe, and which the great chief Red Cloud "says will spread over all the earth."

It seems impossible to trace the exact origin of this Indian faith. An Indian from the upper Columbia River, named Smohalla, preached the doctrine of an Indian Messiah some ten years ago. This Indian taught that there would be an upheaval of nature, which would destroy the white man, and restore to the Indian his ancestral remains, and that the dust of countless dead Indians would spring to life, and would surround without one word of warning each pale-face, who will be swept from the face of the earth. None of the deadly weapons of civilization or skill in their use will avail, and the blood of eighty millions of whites will atone for the wrongs done to the red race. Within a few months the belief in this new religion has spread from tribe to tribe with marvellous rapidity. Runners have traversed thousands of miles to reach distant tribes and bear the glad tidings. The Arapahoes, the Shoshones, the great Sioux tribes, the Cheyennes, both North and South, and many other tribes, have been taught the faith; and the "ghost dance," the religious ceremony of the creed, is being danced by all these tribes.

While Accompanying Major-General Nelson A. Miles and the Northern Cheyenne Commission to the various agencies in the Northwest where the duties of the commission

took them, Mr. Frederic Remington and I took occasion to visit the scene of the ghost dance on a plain near the White River, on the Pine Ridge Agency, in South Dakota. The Indians of this reservation are Sioux and Cheyennes, Red Cloud being the principal chief. This sacred dance is probably in honor of the dead braves, who will soon return to life, and many undoubtedly believe they may appear at any moment. Arranged in a circle, about three hundred of them, alternately a man and a woman, they go round and round ever in the same direction, while the air is filled with a dirge-like chant of a graveyard significance. Now and then one falls down exhausted in a death-like swoon, and is rapidly carried away, while his place is filled. In this swoon, it is claimed, the Indian sees and communes with the Messiah, and learns his wishes, and what is to come to pass. Once seen, they claim, he is never forgotten, and again and again appears to the favored believer.

While at the various agencies I had the opportunity to obtain the statements of several of the apostles of this new religion. Porcupine seems to be the great apostle, while Red Cloud, Sitting Bull, Little Wound, and others also are prominent. Porcupine, in his statement to Major Carroll of his visit to Pyramid Lake, in Nevada, tells of the circumstances of his journey in company with some Bannocks and Shoshones. He undoubtedly went to Salt Lake, travelling by rail, and then by wagon, until he reached tribes there who belong to the fish-eating class of Indians, who largely live west of the Rocky Mountains, and are much more civilized than those on the other side of the Rockies. Here, he claimed, he met several hundred of these Indians in white men's dress - - fifteen or sixteen tribes from the east side of the Rockies were represented -- and here he claims to have received a message from the Messiah, saying the Indians should wait fourteen days, when he would appear to them. They also received a white nut which they were directed to eat. After waiting as directed, suddenly a great crowd of Indians and whites appeared unto them, and the Christ was among them. He had his head bowed, and appeared, to his astonishment, an Indian, for, he says, "I always believed that Christ was a white man." The Christ said: "I have sent for you, and am glad to see you. I am going to talk to you about your relatives who are dead and gone. My children, I want you to listen to all I have to say to you. I will teach you how to dance a dance, and I want you to dance it. Get ready for your dance, and then, when the dance is over, I will talk to you." Then they danced, the Christ singing. They danced until late, when he said it was enough. "The next morning," Porcupine continues, "I saw Christ again, and this time he looked different; he was not as dark as an Indian, nor as light as a white man. He had no beard, but very heavy eyebrows. He was a good-looking man. We were told not to talk; and even if we whispered, Christ would hear us. He talked to us all day, and began to sing, and then trembled all over violently for a while, and afterward sat down. We danced all night, the Christ lying down as if he were dead. The next morning, when we met again, the Christ was with us. He said: 'I am the man who made everything you see around you; I am not lying to you, my children. I made this earth, and everything on it. I have been to heaven, and seen your dead friends, and have seen my own father and mother. In the beginning, after God made the earth, they sent me back to teach the people; and when I came, the people were afraid of me, and treated me badly. This is what they did to me' (showing his scars). 'I did not try to defend myself. I found my children were bad, so I went back to heaven, and left them. I told them in so many hundred years I would come

back to see my children. At the end of this time I was sent back to try to teach them. My father told me the earth was getting old and worn out, and the people getting bad; that I was to renew everything as it used to be, and make it better.' He said the dead would arise, and the earth, which was too small for them, would be enlarged, and he would do away with heaven, and make the earth big enough for all of us; that we must all be friends. In the fall of the year the youth of each one would be renewed if he remained good, and no one would ever get over forty years old. I have returned to my tribe," said Porcupine, "to tell all this. The Christ said we must tell it to every one." In his statement Porcupine says nothing of the destruction of the whites. However, it must be remembered he was talking to an army officer who had with him three troops of cavalry.

Red Cloud, who heard the story from the apostles who claimed to have seen the Messiah, said, "If it was true, it would spread all over the world"; but wisely remarked, "If it was not true, it would melt away like the snow under the hot sun." Little Wound, who also claims to have seen Christ when he appeared at the Shoshone camp, describes him as sitting under a wickiup (the name for a shelter made of boughs in the shape of an Indian tent, or tepee). "The Messiah had long hair down to his shoulders, and when I first saw him he seemed about twenty years old; the next day he appeared thirty; the next, forty; and the next, an old man. He said, 'Come with me, and I will show you your dead relatives'; and suddenly I heard a noise like that of a railroad train. I was carried through the air, and came to a field with a small house on it. I went in, and there was my mother and father and brother who had died long ago. My brother and father were both killed years ago fighting the white man. They came up to me crying, and I shook hands with them." The statement of Sitting Bull how he met the Messiah is very significant of the teaching received from missionaries of the Christian Christ, as will be seen. He describes a star he saw while he was hunting, which he followed unconsciously. Then he came upon a large number of Indians, including many of his old friends who had been killed in various fights with the white men. Black Kettle, who was killed by Custer, he mentions especially as being among them. They were all arranged in a large circle, and were dancing the ghost dance. A man came to him, who afterward he found was the Indian Messiah. He shook Sitting Bull by the hand, and said, "What would you like to eat?" Sitting Bull said he would very much like some buffalo, as it had been a very long time since he had eaten buffalo. The Messiah waved his hand, and a herd of buffalo appeared, and he went out and killed one.

There is no doubt that most of these Indians are sincere in their belief in this new Messiah. It suits them exactly. It is not strange that there should be many versions of how the destruction of the white race and the restoration of the happy hunting-grounds will be accomplished. The manner in which this will be accomplished has been explained in various ways, but it seems generally believed that the Indians will all fall into a trance, and when they awake they will find the whites will have been buried, with all their civilization, many feet beneath the surface of the earth, never to rise again, and the Indians, with all the dead restored to life, will remain upon the earth -- renewed and made many times more beautiful -- alone to enjoy it. No more reservations, no more white men, no more soldiers, to disturb them; the prairies will be covered with grass waist-deep; the

forest and mountains alike will abound in buffalo, elk, deer, and antelope, more abundant than ever.

Another version is that the Messiah will put all the Indians behind him and whites before him; will then roll a stratum of earth thirty feet deep over the earth, burying the white men and all their work beneath. There is little doubt but that this belief is a perversion of the Christian religion as taught by missionaries, and in its present form suits the wishes and hopes of the Indians. It is also very probable that this craze is furthered by the more intelligent and vindictive of the Indians -- many of them would be glad to see anything happen to change their condition -- and is probably furthered by designing white men who would reap the rewards of an Indian outbreak.

Many of the Indians have joined the Mormon faith, and it is believed that the teachings of the Mormons have encouraged these prophecies, in order to increase their influence with the Indians.

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